

# Council puzzled by Duncan's griping over budget

by Douglas Tallman

Staff Writer

Even with virtually all of his budget approved by the Montgomery County Council, County Executive Douglas M. Duncan still seems to have plenty to complain about.

Duncan, who refused to be interviewed for this story, has criticized the council in a series of strident statements about the fiscal 2006 budget.

"We have made tremendous progress over the past decade.... This progress is threatened under the budget adopted today by the council," Duncan said in a statement last week.

On Thursday, the council put the finishing legislative touches on the spending plan for fiscal 2006, which begins July 1. The county will spend \$3.6 billion, cut property taxes by 4 cents, provide \$116 rebates to owner-



Dan Gross/The Gazette

**Montgomery County Councilmen George L. Leventhal and Thomas E. Perez confer during Thursday's final vote on the 2006 budget. "There is so much in the budget that Doug [Duncan] has to be proud of," Perez said.**

occupied homes and expand a tax credit for individuals whose home values are outpacing their income. The council doubled the tax cut Duncan proposed and

tripled the tax relief in his recommended budget. To pay for the tax relief, the council cut Duncan's budget by about \$30 million, delayed some

capital projects and increased borrowing.

Those moves, Duncan said, would deal a setback to the county.

"The Council's budget, with its program cuts, budget gimmicks and deferrals of expenses, only makes our job that much harder. But we have overcome greater challenges — and we will overcome once again," Duncan's statement said.

The rhetoric has bewildered council members, who have chosen not to fight back.

"Many of the initiatives we ultimately passed were initiatives he identified," said Councilman Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown. "I'm struggling to understand where his anger is coming from."

Knapp said he spent 20 minutes on the phone with Duncan after the council's vote on the budget but still didn't understand the source of the county execu-

tive's irritation.

"There is so much in the budget that Doug has to be proud of," said Council President Thomas E. Perez (D-Dist. 5) of Takoma Park.

Councilwoman Marilyn J. Praisner said county residents should not see the council and county executive arguing.

"I'm puzzled and I'm concerned by [his comments] because I think they were over the top. It was beyond what was necessary," said Praisner (D-Dist. 4) of Calverton.

And outside Montgomery — where Duncan's likely gubernatorial bid needs to gain momentum — the complaints helped to draw attention to what Duncan could not get funded.

"He better stop complaining or people will think it's a bad deal," said Matthew A. Crenson, a political science professor at

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Johns Hopkins University. "It makes it look like there was fat in his budget and that's not good for him."

But others see Duncan's comments as playing to a statewide audience.

"He has to show what a strong leader he can be," said Gail H. Ewing, a former county councilwoman and now a political science professor at Montgomery College. "If the budget is cut, he can tell advocates it was not his fault."

Crenson noted that Duncan has made similarly "politically ineffectual" attacks before. At the end of this year's General Assembly session, Duncan criti-

cized Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley for his late support for stem cell research.

"He tried to whip him to death with a stalk of asparagus," Crenson said.

Republicans are licking their chops over the budget outcome.

"The council unanimously doubled the property tax cut, they've put Duncan in his place.



**Duncan**  
*Playing to state audience*

It was a slap to Doug Duncan's spending," said Thomas Reinheimer, chairman of the Montgomery

County Republican Party. "I don't think it looks good for Doug Duncan."

But Duncan has a few supporters, among them Councilman Michael L. Subin.

"The executive sends his budget over, and it never comes out the same way it came in," said Subin (D-At large) of Gaithersburg.

Education and public safety — two of Subin's signature issues — will be better off at the start of the next fiscal year compared with the start of the current one, Subin said.

Councilman Steven A. Silverman was also philosophical about Duncan's vitriol.

"At the end of the day, Doug Duncan's budget will be providing significant investments to access to health care, af-

fordable housing and smaller class sizes. That's a win to me," said Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring.

The friction between the executive and legislative branches was part of the decisions revolving around property taxes, Subin said. The budget was the first in four years to meet a provision in the County Charter that limits the growth in property tax collections to inflation and new development. Duncan had proposed exceeding the charter limit. Five council members in December passed a non-binding resolution in December pledging to meet the charter limit.

"It got to be so strange because I think people didn't accept the fact at first it was a political budget, not a fiscal budget,"

Subin said.

As the weeks of budget deliberation wore on, the charter limit advocates were able to sway their colleagues, ultimately leading to a unanimous budget vote.

The charter limit vote could be score as a victory for Perez, in his first term as councilman and only six months into his council presidency. Working behind the scenes, he helped to broker the final deals that led to a 9-0 vote on the budget. Subin said the council was sharply divided. One side wanted to try to reach the charter limit and the other worried about the sacrifices to services that would have been made in the attempt.

"The council president was able to cobble together a budget where everybody gave something up," Subin said.